

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 10, 2021
10:03 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes
Senator Peter Micciche
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 111

"An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to public schools; relating to early education programs; relating to funding for early education programs; relating to school age eligibility; relating to reports by the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to reports by school districts; relating to certification and competency of teachers; relating to assessing reading deficiencies and providing reading intervention services to public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; relating to textbooks and materials for reading intervention services; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to school operating funds; relating to a virtual education consortium; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 111

SHORT TITLE: EARLY EDUCATION; READING INTERVENTION

SPONSOR(S): EDUCATION

03/24/21	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/24/21	(S)	EDC, FIN
03/26/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

03/26/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/26/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/29/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/29/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/29/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/31/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/31/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/31/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/07/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
04/07/21	(S)	-- MEETING CANCELED --
04/09/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
04/09/21	(S)	-- Invited & Public Testimony-Removed from Agenda
04/09/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
04/10/21	(S)	EDC AT 10:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

DIANNE ORR, Director
Teaching and Learning
Anchorage School District
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

LAURA NEVADA, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

TIMOTHY BARTO, Alaska Policy Form
Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

RONDA SCHLUMBOHM, representing self
Salcha, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified about the importance of pre-K during the hearing on SB 111.

ELEILIA PRESTON, representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

ROY GETCHELL, Superintendent
Haines Borough School District
Haines, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns about education regulations during the hearing of SB 111.

PATRICIA FISHER, representing self
Meadow Lakes, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

KEVIN HALL, representing self
Sterling, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent
Alaska Gateway School District
Tok, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified with concerns about SB 111.

LINDA HULEN, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director
Best Beginnings
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of preschool during the hearing on SB 111.

CHRISTINE HUTCHINSON, representing self
Kenai Peninsula, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

NORM WOOTEN, Director of Advocacy
Association of Alaska School Boards
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

REBECCA HIMSCHOOT, representing self
Sitka, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

DAVID BOYLE, representing self
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

POSIE BOGGS
Alaska Reading Coalition
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 111.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[10:03:37 AM](#)

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 10:03 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Micciche, Hughes, and Chair Holland. Senators Begich and Stevens arrived shortly thereafter.

SB 111-EARLY EDUCATION; READING INTERVENTION

[10:04:10 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 111 "An Act relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to public schools; relating to early education programs; relating to funding for early education programs; relating to school age eligibility; relating to reports by the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to reports by school districts; relating to certification and competency of teachers; relating to assessing reading deficiencies and providing reading intervention services to public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; relating to textbooks and materials for reading intervention services; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to school operating funds; relating to a virtual education consortium; and providing for an effective date."

[10:04:51 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND opened public testimony and announced that each testifier would be limited to two or three minutes.

[10:05:00 AM](#)

DIANNE ORR, Director, Teaching and Learning, Anchorage School District, Anchorage, Alaska, stated support for SB 111 for its focus on reading. Alaska needs statewide teacher training on the science of reading. The bill needs to have clear expectations for instruction, a systemic, structured approach, with evidence-based reading intervention. Pre-K through grade two screenings must be administered three times a year. The Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) must set high standards for early education. Rigorous, early childhood programming provides equity. It must be aligned to a robust K-3 system of evidence-based instruction to reach the goal of all children reading proficiently by third grade.

[10:07:18 AM](#)

LAURA NEVADA, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, stated that she has been an educator for over 25 years. She works as a lead

instructional coach for the Anchorage School District. Reading is not a natural process. Written language is a code. SB 111 ensures systematic and explicit instruction in the science of reading in pre-K through third grade. SB 111 has a multitiered system of support with evidence-based instruction and progress monitoring. The bill ensures stronger communication between parents and schools. Every child deserves the fundamental right to read. SB 111 is one way to do that.

10:09:38 AM

TIMOTHY BARTO, Alaska Policy Form, Eagle River, Alaska, said the reading scores for Alaska's fourth graders are dead last when compared to the other 49 states and D.C. Alaska schools have good teachers and its students have the same potential for learning as children in the rest of the country. While Alaska's per student spending ranks among the top five in the country, Alaska's children are still not learning the most basic of educational skills. This must change. That can happen through robust K-3 literacy programs. Reading should be the fundamental objective in public schools. All other curricula are secondary. Students who are not competent readers by age nine have worse outcome. Students not reading proficiently by third grade will receive interventions. If students do not read proficiently by the end of third grade, they should not be promoted to fourth grade. Holding students back is not punishment. It gives them an opportunity to catch up. Many states have had success with K-3 literacy programs. The committee heard testimony about the success of Mississippi in turnings its literacy outcomes around. Alaska can do the same with the legislation before the committee. The future of the state will be greatly enhanced by it.

10:12:09 AM

RONDA SCHLUMBOHM, representing self, Salcha, Alaska, said she is a teacher who wants the committee to continue to work on SB 111. There is much that can be done to improve it. A bill that funds a program for a short period of time will not have the impact the committee is seeking. Many have testified about the need for universal pre-K. To make a difference, fully fund pre-K. Her experience is that children who have had pre-K do not struggle like the children who have not had that opportunity. Perhaps the bill should focus only on pre-K and then build on that in subsequent years. She has provided the committee a letter with a link to the research of Dr. Paul Thomas. She can tell the committee that the biggest factor with struggling kids is poverty. If the state still wants to improve education after adding pre-K, then add things to the bill that help teachers,

such as funding professional development. Two glaring problems in the state are access to curriculum and books to read. She sees a lack of accountability with school attendance. She has a student who has missed many days and there is nothing she can be do about it.

10:15:48 AM

ELEILIA PRESTON, representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, stated that she has taught all over the country and is a military spouse. In the past she had heard Alaska was the place to be. When her family got orders to be in Alaska, she heard that things had changed. Forty-five percent of military children are not proficient, which means they are behind when they leave the state. The state can do better with military children. The bill can help with that. Teachers must have academic freedom. Every child needs to be taught differently.

10:17:43 AM

ROY GETCHELL, Superintendent, Haines Borough School District, Haines, Alaska, said he is thankful the state is having a conversation about reading. His school district believes in the importance of reading as well as other skills. Haines students have maintained and also shown growth during the pandemic. Ninety-nine percent of its seniors are on track to graduate. He supports the introduction of preschool. That is a common component of high-performing countries. The Alaska Education Challenge sets the course for the state. He urges caution with regulations, mandates, and high-stakes accountability. Legislation cannot replace the leadership he provides.

10:20:29 AM

SENATOR MICCICHE congratulated him for Haines' 2019 PEAKS language arts scores. Haines was third in the state. He asked for Superintendent Getchell to send an email about what works in his district.

MR. GETCHELL replied that he knows what works. There are some things to polish up in Alaska, but he would be careful about some initiatives.

SENATOR BEGICH asked what he wants the legislators to avoid.

MR. GETCHELL responded that Alaska is concerned about some things. Every system around the globe is, but Alaska should avoid chasing the global reform movement, which is high, high-stakes accountability. He is not afraid of that, but what he has seen from working overseas is that the most effective school

districts and systems empower teachers. He heard testimony a second ago about academic freedom. The state must be careful not to hamstring teachers. He would avoid mandatory retention. His district is having parent-teacher conferences now. That is required in the reading plans, and his district is doing reading plans voluntarily. Many times parents who don't come to conferences and aren't involved have had bad experiences in school and many times that involved retention. There is a place for it, but the state needs to be careful about a one-size fits all.

10:23:20 AM

PATRICIA FISHER, representing self, Meadow Lakes, Alaska, said the strong reading program she had in kindergarten started her on a lifelong love of reading and education. Children need a strong, early education program as provided by SB 111. She is against the sunset clause in the bill, which is detrimental to long-term planning, and suggested an annual review instead.

10:24:19 AM

KEVIN HALL, representing self, Sterling, Alaska, thanked the senators for their work on the bill.

10:24:51 AM

SCOTT MACMANUS, Superintendent, Alaska Gateway School District, Tok, Alaska, said third grade students in his district have improved on MAP tests over the past four years. Alaska Gateway's goal is that all children read at grade level by third grade, but the district still has a long way to go. He did not support SB 111 as originally presented and does not know if he will support it yet because he has not seen the committee substitute. He grew up and lives in rural Alaska. In today's testimony he hears a different perspective between urban and rural Alaska. He supported SB 8. Legislators like Senator Begich and Senator Stevens have long demonstrated their support of public education and have been important in the evolution of this bill. SB 111 could be one of most important bills that the committee ever considers and will impact children in the state for years to come. He hopes the upcoming changes in SB 111 will have good results. There are things that would improve the system. Teacher retention is one. Alaska Gateway this year had zero turnover among tenured staff because it hires the best staff it can and treats them as quality professionals. Alaska needs legislative help to do this across the state. Everyone believes in reading at grade level, so use best evidence-based practices to do that. The primary goals of the bill are laudable. The state must insist that the in-state teacher prep system provide reading

training for all teachers. Universities and school districts must support reading training for teachers new to the state. The state needs to attract more quality teachers to Alaska. Hiring has been his primary focus since January. Educators are asking the legislature to hold them accountable for performance. He welcomes that. The mandated retention needs to be eliminated. No evidence supports that. John Hattie's research shows it has negative effect. Support pre-K so that students are ready for school. This is so essential. In his district, students start kindergarten with a vocabulary that is below average and that problem multiplies itself. Educators want to do these things with the help of legislators and that will help educators help all of their students.

[10:29:15 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH commented that the committee reviewed the proposed changes for the committee substitute yesterday that will be available soon. There has been a real review of all the hard work that went into the other education bills. He is hopeful that many of Mr. McManus' concerns are addressed in the committee substitute. The committee might be on the right path to a strong bill. He has faith in the process and the chair and his staff.

SENATOR MICCICHE asked Mr. MacManus to forward his studies about retention. The bill has release valves with parents having the final say about retention at the end of third grade. It is a soft requirement for retention.

MR. MACMANUS replied that he would.

SENATOR HUGHES added that if the research about retention does not involve schools with intensive reading intervention and prevention strategies, it is not applicable. It was that way in the past but it is done differently now. If he has research from read-by-nine states, she would like to see that research.

[10:32:42 AM](#)

LINDA HULEN, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said she has been teaching for more than 20 years in the Anchorage School District. Reading is near and dear to her heart. The pre-K program is important. From what she has heard and read, schools districts that have solid pre-K produce students who do well when they become adults. She is concerned about the sunset clause in the bill to take out preschool at some point. That does not seem wise. The state needs stable, long-term investment for students and communities. Early education is critical.

Oversight reporting makes sense and is good policy but repealing pre-K is not.

CHAIR HOLLAND explained that the sunset provisions are left in the bill. It is not to repeal pre-K so much as it is to force a future legislature to look at how well the program is working. It is an efficacy test and is fiscally prudent.

MS. HULEN asked how districts will show that pre-K is working.

CHAIR HOLLAND said hopefully the state will have reading improvement.

MS. HULEN asked if the bill is directly linking reading improvement to pre-K.

CHAIR HOLLAND replied that it is over 10 years.

SENATOR BEGICH said the department now measures how well students in pre-K do when they enter kindergarten. That will be one of the metrics. If the K-3 process is working, that should lead to outcomes that can be measured in third grade. The committee substitute is talking about a 10-year sunset so progress should be able to be tracked through eighth grade. He has some reluctance about supporting the sunset clause. He has been told that in the committee substitute the sunset clause will apply to the entire bill. He would prefer robust oversight and reporting, but he is willing to look at what the committee substitute has to provide. There are metrics that can be measured for both early education and reading improvement. Cause vs. correlation is always difficult to measure. The legislative process can be messy, but if there is a strong bill with areas to improve on over the years, then he is hopeful about the bill.

SENATOR MICCICHE said he appreciated Ms. Hulen's call. The state of Alaska invests significantly in the education of its students. The committee received an interesting document on myth killers. For nonminority, upper income fourth graders, the state is 49th in the country in 2019. Some districts with well-developed pre-K programs are not at the top of the heap in Alaska. He wants to see legislature more involved in some expectations for education, not as a parent but as an investor who wants to help. In this case, he started off being concerned about sunset dates. He thinks it can be very beneficial to see if the policy needs to be adjusted over the next few years or perhaps additional intervention programs be provided. Florida went from 31st to first in six years for fourth grade with

similar intervention. That is significant progress. He wants to see the same outcome. He does not see the sunset as negative. He sees it as a more developed partnership between the state and districts.

CHAIR HOLLAND shared that Ms. Hulen was critical about the sunset provision and he wants people to understand what will be in the committee substitute and what the changes will be. His office is still waiting to get the committee substitute.

SENATOR MICCICHE asked Ms. Hulen if she had a response.

MS. HULEN responded that she appreciated the discussion about the sunset. She would hate to see a program in which communities have preschool for kids and then it is taken away. She would like to see stability for communities. For another thing about reading, in the 20 years she has been teaching teachers do progress monitoring with fluency but not for comprehension. In the early years, vocabulary development is needed. That helps kids make sense of the world. She has had kids who are fluent by test standards, but they do not understand what they read. These parameters to monitor progress are snapshots. They do not tell the whole story, so care should be taken about what is mandated.

10:42:18 AM

ABBE HENSLEY, Executive Director, Best Beginnings, Anchorage, Alaska, thanked the committee for putting forward a bill that deals with pre-K and early literacy and honing the legislation to make it the best possible. There was discussion about causation and correlation. The state needs to make sure excellent pre-K programs are followed by excellent K-3 programs. One recommendation from the Ready to Read, Ready to Learn taskforce in 2006 was to develop a statewide system of voluntary and affordable early childhood education, so the state has been working on this a long time. Her group supports adding culturally responsive language to SB 111. That is so important for the youngest learners. She has heard a lot of comments about the sunset clause. The state does not sunset K-12 education and many other programs. The DEED pre-K grant programs have seen good results. That takes personnel and money for collecting and analyzing data. Two districts receiving state funds since 2008 for pre-K, Lower Kuskokwim and Nome, have shown increases in MAP scores for those who attended state-funded preschool. Education Northwest recently completed a report that does show a connection between pre-K and third grade proficiency in Alaska.

10:47:43 AM

CHRISTINE HUTCHINSON, representing self, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska, said she is a continual proponent of the sunset clause. She appreciated the clarification about its use to review the program rather than eliminate it. There are pockets of success in the state in getting kids to learn to read. One is the Northern Lights ABC School. Discipline with a reading program like at Northern Lights ABC School is not common. Kids come with challenges, but there are solutions. She cannot find a fiscal note for the bill. She is unsure about where the money will come from. She recommended the committee to pass this legislation because reading is important. People learn to read and then read to learn. Passing this will make something concrete happen for schools.

10:51:34 AM

NORM WOOTEN, Director of Advocacy, Association of Alaska School Boards, Juneau, Alaska, said he looks forward to seeing the committee substitute. Several things in the bill have long been supported by the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB)--a robust pre-K program, evidence-based reading instruction, and early reading interventions. AASB appreciates and supports the high, professional rigorous standards for early educators. Research is coming out about the importance of evidence-based reading instruction, so anything the state can do to help teachers become more proficient with that will be appreciated. AASB supports the increase of the carryover fund balance. There is a lot of money flowing into the state from the CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act and other federal funding for pandemic efforts. That provision will enable districts to spend that money appropriately rather than be in use-it-or-lose-it mode. He thanked the committee for its willingness to listen to educators and supporters of education. AASB's emphasis has been on making this a better bill, not to kill the bill. This has the potential for positively affecting results for generations of students to come.

10:54:36 AM

REBECCA HIMSCHOOT, representing self, Sitka, Alaska, said she teaches in the Keet Gooshi Heen elementary school. Her school is nearly 20 points above the statewide average for language arts on PEAKS and 15 points above the statewide average for math. She is proud of the work in her school. In 2016 she was appointed to the State Board of Education and has looked at education from the policy and classroom perspective. She is concerned about the sunset. She is pleased that there will be 10 years to get some results. Her concern is whether school leaders will commit to programs that could go away, but anything that will get a more

robust pre-K system in the state will bring the rewards they are looking for. In 2018 she went to the national conference for state boards of education. A Duke University reading policy expert said so much has been done to target discrete skills in reading and math, but those discrete skills are not useful for kids unless they have the opportunity to do science and social studies and apply the learning. The expert said that perhaps the teaching of science and social studies should be mandated. She is not suggesting adding that to the bill but wanted to bring it to the committee's attention. The term culturally responsive is important in the bill so that districts recognize they need to teach in the way their students learn.

10:59:10 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said many of the concerns about culturally responsive language and stronger language for coordination with existing programs have been addressed in the committee substitute. He added that he too has expressed concern about the level of commitment from districts for preschools if there is a sunset.

11:00:37 AM

DAVID BOYLE, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said there is no one who does not want to see students succeed, particularly in reading. He does not know what the sunset clause is, but the committee needs to do this right. If it is done wrong, it is just putting more money in a system that is not going to get the desired results. He doesn't want pre-K put in the foundation formula. Once it is there, it is difficult to pull it out. He wants to see funding tied to results to incentivize good behavior. If districts improve reading scores, then the legislature should fund them. On the other hand, if districts do not improve, then the legislature should start pulling the money back. Since 2008, the state of Alaska has received over \$500 million in Head Start funds. He asked if any of those kids who have been in Head Start have been taught to read. If they have, then why are the reading scores so low compared to the rest of the nation. Alabama has had the highest quality pre-K system in the U.S. for the last 13 years, but it has not resulted in better NAEP scores. Alaska is the only state that is lower. This is a fairly good bill. The committee should do it right and incentivize good programs, outcomes, and schools.

11:04:52 AM

POSIE BOGGS, Alaska Reading Coalition, Anchorage, Alaska, said she has heard many excellent things from testifiers today. She likes Section 26 on page 19 which talks about incentives for

districts. She recommended not tying incentives to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. They could be tied to a new assessment K-3 that DEED might provide. That will give the legislature the data to verify the effectiveness of the bill. She has a study that ties high-quality preschool to eighth grade outcomes. It is explicit evidence that preschool matters. She thanked the committee for its hard work.

SENATOR BEGICH pointed out that the NAEP reference in that section will be removed from the committee substitute, so she has been heard.

[11:08:14 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND thanked all the callers and closed public testimony.

SENATOR BEGICH said that he wanted to reiterate some points made today. Two metrics that matter are whether districts show improvement relative to others and relative to themselves. The bill has early education backed up by strong reading, which gets to the issue that some of the testifiers brought up, such as Alabama's early education not working. That is because there is not a strong reading program there. Incorporating and collectively building these things is what SB 111 intends to do. That is exactly what the state wants to do with education policy. He has a reservation only because he has not seen the committee substitute yet. The testimony underscores where the state needs to be going. He is looking forward to seeing the committee substitute and moving it rapidly out of committee.

[SB 111 was held in committee.]

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[11:10:12 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 11:10 a.m.